Learning to Forgive Yourself

Your heart health and mental health may depend on your ability to **reduce hurt and anger** towards others AND towards yourself. We have talked about forgiving others. But not about forgiving yourself.

Did you cheat on your spouse? Hit a child in anger? Steal something? Go off the wagon? Betray a friendship? The list of potential human misdeeds is long.

…Why is learning to forgive yourself a lot harder than forgiving others?

If someone else did these things, you might learn to forgive them or at least let go of the anger. That's because **it's easier to forgive others**. After all, **they don't live in your head**, reading you the same old riot act. All the world's major religions preach the power of forgiveness. But forgiveness is such an elusive act, quicksilver in its ability to be strongly felt one moment and then dart away beyond reach the next.

According to Stanford University, the **definition of forgiveness** is a simple one, not a near-impossible requirement that a person apply for sainthood. "Forgiveness," it says, "consists primarily of taking less personal offense, reducing anger and the blaming of the offender, and developing an increased understanding of situations that lead to hurt and anger."

**Healing requires Forgiveness of yourself**.

Sharon A. Hartman, LSW, a clinical trainer at the Caron Foundation, a drug and alcohol treatment center in Wernersville, Pa., deals with the need to forgive every day. "These are such shame-based diseases," she says. "Forgiving oneself is one of the more difficult parts of recovery."

A chronic state of anger and resentment interferes with life, Hartman points out. Countless studies also show stress and anger can cause or worsen diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, and various autoimmune disorders. "When resentment is interfering with your life, it's time to forgive yourself," she says. "So many people have a constant, critical voice in their heads narrating their every move." She says she calls her critical voice "Gertrude" and tries to counteract Gertrude's eternal litany with positive affirmations -- that she is getting better, that she is less angry. "Forgiving doesn't mean not being angry with yourself, but not hating yourself.

"No one," Hartman adds, "can beat us up better than we beat ourselves up."

**Forgiving Requires Specificity**

"I think people often try to forgive themselves for the wrong things," says Joretta L. Marshall, PhD, a United Methodist minister and professor of pastoral care at the Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. "We think we ought to forgive ourselves for being human and making human mistakes. People don't have to forgive themselves for being who they are -- gay or lesbian, or having some kind of handicap. Forgiveness means being specific about what we did that needs forgiving."

"I think forgiveness is often confused with condoning or lack of accountability," Hartman says. "This is a world with high performance standards. People think they need to be perfect. Yet people do things -- intended or not -- that hurt others. You may not intend to harm, but the other person is no less hurt." That's when you need to stop at some point and forgive yourself.

**Hanging on to Resentment Can Have Advantages**

"It's about relinquishing a source of pain and letting go of resentment. People think forgiving yourself means you are letting yourself get away with whatever it was you did," Hartman goes on. "The pain of guilt and anger you are feeling are supposed to be your punishment."

People want to feel guilt and resentment? "Oh," exclaims Hartman, "resentment is a very attractive way of putting a barrier around yourself as protection against being hurt again."

If toting around self-loathing like a heavy backpack has advantages, how do you empty it of the self-incriminating videos and sound tracks in your mind?

It can be done without formal therapy, Marshall says. "But not without community of some kind. It is in the context of our relationships (whether with therapists, pastors, counselors, churches, families, and friends) that we experience the grace of being forgiven and forgiving others." Grace, of course, is a peace of mind bestowed regardless of whether we deserve it or not.

"**You need to talk to someone** as a rule," Hartman says.

**How Do You Know You Have Forgiven Yourself?**

You picked the wrong mate and the kids suffered neglect. You spread a story that got someone fired. You didn't report a crime and others were victimized. Is talking to a therapist and declaring yourself forgiven enough? Hartman says, "You know you have done enough when the memory gives you no more pain or anger,". "It's as simple as that. You can say, 'I am free of this.'"

Of course, **along with this often goes the need to ask the wronged person to forgive you as well.** "Forgiveness," Marshall notes, "is never complete unless people and relationships are transformed in the process." That transformation, of course, should involve never repeating the action.

Writing on this subject in Selfhelp Magazine, Richard B. Patterson, PhD, a clinical psychologist in El Paso, Texas, says, "**Making amends is more than a simple 'I'm sorry**.' It involves a willingness to listen to another person's hurt. It involves a *willingness to take immediate corrective action." He says, however, that if disclosure would harm the other person ("I am sorry I slept with your husband. Oh, you didn't know?") you need to find another way to make amends indirectly, even by praying for the person.*

Hartman likens the sequence, if done properly, to a technique her husband used to correct a problem with his computer. He didn't want to lose data, so someone told him to set the clock back to before the problem occurred. This way, he lost the mistake, but not the data in the memory.

That's what forgiving yourself is -- you don't forget the mistake, but it doesn't cause any trouble and you don't lose the memory of it.

Condensed and amended from the article, “Learn to Forgive Yourself” by Jean Lawrence, in the WebMD Archives.